

UNDER DEVELOPMENT

The Antiques Sideshow

David Robinson gets nostalgic about the Amstrad CPC464 and discovers that old computers never die, they just end up on eBay

Ever one with an eye for a bargain, I bought a computer this month for £1. Well, I paid 99p for the computer and £2.95 for the postage. The sceptics among you may ask how much memory it has, how big the disk capacity is and what kind of processor it has. The answers are 64KB (not GB, or even MB), nothing (if you discount a C90 cassette) and a Zilog Z80 (you can be forgiven if you've never heard of that).

The machine in question is an Amstrad CPC464 that I spotted in an idle moment trawling through eBay. It had zero bids, a starting price of 99p and the seller wasn't adopting the crafty ploy of selling something cheap but hoping to make a profit by overcharging on the postage. But even at an outlay of a meagre £3.94 (a small fortune to a Yorkshireman, let me tell you), what did I want with such a thing? Well, let me explain.

PI-MAN IN THE SKY

In 1983 the software business started by the missus and me was beginning to make some progress and we were carving out a niche creating practical programs that saved users time and money. Most of our sales were mail order or what we could sell at the many computer shows around at the time. It was at one of these shows that I first met Mel (*Rants & Raves*) Croucher, who was selling a Sinclair Spectrum game called Pi-Man involving a pink furry character that looked like a cross between Mr Blobby and a Teletubby. Mel would appear on the hour, every hour, dressed as the Pi-Man, terrorising the crowds into buying the game. I met him again last month and he hasn't changed a bit.

We needed more sales volume. Out of the blue we received a letter from William Poel (erstwhile contributor to this magazine) asking if we were interested in developing software for a new British home computer. It was all very hush-hush and any further participation required me to sign a confidentiality agreement with severe penalties for blabbing (we might get granny back next month).



In those days new British home computers were ten a penny, with launches of stunning devices such as the Dragon and the Oric seemingly every other week. There was no compatibility between them so, if you wanted to sell a new computer, you also had to have a shed-load of software for it at the launch or you were doomed to fail before you'd even started.

The rumour was that Amstrad had been developing a computer for the home market and that one of the key engineers involved had been put under so much pressure to complete the job from the 'apprentice master' that he'd cracked, buggered off and left the hardware development in a half-baked state.

William, who was running his own electronics components and consultancy company, was one of a few people called in to fight the fire and help get the computer to market. It was also rumoured that the aforesaid engineer had been found in Windermere (the town, not the lake) and would not be persuaded, for any amount of money, to return.

SLOW DEVELOPER

If you're going to develop software, you have to have a computer to develop it on. Since all these home computers lived in their own little world, if you wanted to develop software for an Amstrad CPC464 you had to do it on an Amstrad CPC464 – which, in production

form at least, didn't exist. So 50 of the things were hand-built as pre-production prototypes. These were light grey, as opposed to the black ones that went into production, and had a modified Amstrad TV as a monitor. The production CPC464s were unique in the home market in having a proper dedicated screen rather than the more usual half-arsed arrangement of outputting the video signal through an RF modulator and plugging that into a domestic TV. By sending the video signal directly, the CPC avoided the gruesome colour fringes you often got on other machines.

After travelling to Essex to meet William and discuss what software we were to produce for the launch, I was given one of the 50 prototypes to work with.

HAD ITS CHIPS

The only chip that's likely to be removable from a modern computer's motherboard is the processor. The CPC, like many of its contemporaries, contained a raft of chips, many of them mounted in sockets so that they could be removed and replaced. Periodically, somebody at Amstrad headquarters would send me a handful of replacements as the firmware was developed and updated.

Just before the launch, I received a new chip that was part of the video circuitry. These things could be reprogrammed so, as required by those interested in Amstrad's cost-saving, I sent the old

ones back. Sadly, this last chip proved somewhat unreliable and wouldn't always bring up the screen display on bootup. By this time the first production machines were coming through and Amstrad solved the problem by them sending me one of those rather than a new chip.

SUGAR AND SPICE

As one of the development team I got an invitation to the CPC464 launch, which was memorable for kicking off with Sir Alan Sugar descending down an illuminated ramp, surrounded by clouds of dry ice and carrying this latest example of his entrepreneurship. Then, as now, he wore the countenance of a belligerent, grizzled Womble. Thank goodness he can no longer fix me with bulging eyes and declare, "You're fired."

I've always had this vision of my grandson turning up to an edition of *Antiques Roadshow* in about 2050 with this grey box under his arm and being told by some expert that it's very rare (which it is) and that it's worth £50 million or so. But if it doesn't work, that's bound to affect the value. So I had hoped that the eBay machine, for the princely sum of 99p, would lay down its life and donate a working replacement for the sickly video chip.

The eBay computer works OK, but on opening it up I found that the mass of chips and wires in my prototype has been reduced to a much smaller PCB and the multitude of programmable chips consolidated into a couple of larger, programmable gate arrays. If you look at www.drsaxon.co.uk you'll find pictures of both computers and you'll see just how different they are. You'll also find pictures of other computers of similar vintage and other stuff that won't fit here, including my book of the month and advice on system development.

But I'm mortified. I've wasted 99p. I don't suppose anybody wants to buy a CPC464? ☹

David Robinson
Software and systems
developer



davidr@computershopper.co.uk